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# The Right to Education in the Republic of Macedonia: The Right to Education in one's Mother Tongue

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## Abstract

The right to education in the Republic of Macedonia in the past was not a complete right due to the powerful impact of the former political system. However, the current pluralist system of parliamentary democracy is based on the implementation of international human rights in general, and educational rights in particular. Therefore, the right to education in one's mother tongue has been carefully and seriously reviewed by the state authorities in the 21st century, as a result of the citizens' real needs and necessities. This paper analyzes the right to education in one's mother tongue in Macedonia as well as its legal and institutional grounds and the current situation with the education opportunities in the Albanian language in Macedonia.

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**Keywords:** Human Rights Education, Mother Tongue, Republic of Macedonia, Albanian Community;

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## 1. Introduction

As a country with a communist background, Macedonia underwent a reforming path towards the democratic system. However, the transformation to a democratic society was accompanied by numerous difficulties including interethnic relations and the issue of the education in one's mother tongue.

The application of people's mother tongue in education in Macedonia has always been influenced by politics. The issue about educational policy continued to become very politicized, because of the unyielding position of the government on this demand (Ackermann, 1996).

In the former socialist system the citizens did not enjoy the same opportunities to study in their own mother tongue. In the independent Macedonia (after the year 1991), the language policy has been dealt with within the framework of interethnic relations and has been considered a very complicated issue, closely connected to politics and political and historical circumstances within the relations among different communities.

Education in the mother tongue has always been a neuralgic issue among communities, namely an issue whose resolution has lasted more than two decades. The reason has been quite simple: other communities have required education in their own mother tongue, enjoyment of equal educational rights as their Macedonian counterparts, but Macedonian political parties have never accepted this by saying that "communities, other than the Macedonian, can

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be educated in higher education institutions only in Macedonian". The whole situation, as mentioned earlier, was a reflection of circumstances from the former communist regime and the lack of readiness to deal with real needs and the democratic right to education in one's mother tongue.

But, after the crisis that burst out in 2001 and the endorsement of the Ohrid Agreement, the language issue got a new more concrete dimension and as a consequence the Albanian language became the second official language in Macedonia, while creating a legal ground for the legalization of education in one's mother tongue for other communities, too.

Further on, in the paper, special attention will be paid to the development of circumstances and opportunities for education in one's mother tongue in Macedonia, especially the possibility for higher education in Albanian.

## **2. The right to primary and secondary education in the mother tongue in the Republic of Macedonia**

The public education system is organized and managed according to the model of separated education for different communities, since, in accordance with the Constitution, the citizens have the right to freely express their national identity, whereas the decision upon the language in which they are going to study is a result of their own free will. The system has been devoted to the observance and appreciation of students' and the society's cultural differences whereas special care is dedicated to the lingual and ethnic diversity (Trajkovski, 2001).

The Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia from 1991 guarantees to every citizen the right and access to education in accordance with same terms (Article 44), whereas community members are granted the right to education in their mother tongue in primary and secondary education (Article 48). More concretely, the primary and secondary education are guaranteed with respective laws, without any kind of gender, racial, national, social, religious and/or property discrimination.

If the members of a community pursue their education in a language that is different from Macedonian, the teaching/learning –scientific activity is exercised in the language and writing of that respective community.

## **3. The development of higher education in the mother tongue in Macedonia: opportunities to study in Albanian**

When Macedonia was a constitutive part of the former Yugoslavia, only education in Macedonian was available. The only alternative for other communities as regards higher education was The High Pedagogical School (established by the President Decree number 7852 of 17.09.1947, whereas the same went on functioning as a Pedagogical Academy from 1961) as an institution to produce teachers for primary schools. This institution operated for about three decades, until 08.10.1987 when another decree came into force by the then Minister of Education, according to which the teaching at universities would only be held in Macedonian. This ended the education in Albanian. Based on some statistical data there were 6,161 Macedonian teachers and 986 (13.79%) Albanian teachers that graduated from every department at the Academy; of 5,375 graduated students from the Skopje University, only 92 (1.71%) were Albanians.

Even though the Pedagogical Academy marked the first steps in the higher education of Albanians in their mother tongue, it was proved to be a partial solution since it did not include education at all levels and did not aim at educating cadres in different fields but primary school teachers.

The Macedonian state did not create any conditions for higher education in the mother tongue for communities in Macedonia even after its independence, which was regarded as a lack of political will of the Macedonian authorities. The Albanian political factor at that time expressed their interest in the Macedonian Parliament in finding a solution to this problem by opening the Pedagogical Faculty which would produce secondary school cadres. This happened indeed and with a decision made by the St. Cyril and Methodius University Rectorate (No. 08-856/3 of 1995), the Pedagogical faculty was established. Its activity was based on the wealthy pedagogical experience from the past, first being a higher pedagogical school and then an academy, where Macedonian, Albanian, and Turkish cadres were being prepared.

The reactivation of a Pedagogical Faculty for Albanian teachers it was justified on the basis of Article 48 of the constitution, which allows education in minority languages at primary and secondary schools. It is, however, inconsistent and contradictory that teachers for the classes 5 to 8 as well as for secondary school classes have continued to be trained in Macedonian. But this was motivate protest of Macedonian students on the streets of Skopje in February an March 1997. The demonstrations became the venue for expressing general anti-Albanian sentiments and the dissatisfaction with governmental politics.

Of course, this would not put an end to the issue of the higher education in the mother tongue for communities in Macedonia, since the need was to have other profiles of professionalized people from the Albanian and other communities, and not only primary and secondary school teachers. An overwhelming solution to the problem was being sought.

### 3.1 The civic initiative for establishing universities in Albanian

Having in consideration the above-mentioned circumstances, Albanian intellectuals started the activities for self-organization of the higher education in their mother tongue, guaranteed by the United Nation Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960) which had also been signed and ratified by Macedonia in April 1997. But, as described below, the situation is quite different in reality and the constitutional model of multiethnic values has not - at least for some issues - moved from theory to practice: Albanians have been dissatisfied and determined to set up their own institutions, which were closed down by the police (Duncan, 2002).

The engagement in establishing Albanian language higher education institutions was a preoccupation for the Albanian political factors in Macedonia as well whose argumentation was that several tens of thousand Albanian pupils finished their primary school and a considerable number of those pupils would enroll in secondary schools and then look for higher education institutions. On the other hand, after the independence of Macedonia, more than 5,000 Macedonian students enrolled at two existing universities with Macedonian language of instruction (in Skopje and Bitola) each year. All this influenced the activation of the Albanian community to undertake concrete initiatives requiring help and support from international subjects in order to realize their right to education in their mother tongue

Table 1. Participation of ethnic group by levels and percentage, 1998/99

Ethnic group	Primary Education		Secondary Education		Higher Education	
Macedonians	150566	(59.0%)	69183	(79.2%)	31095	(89.2%)
Albanians	77035	(30.2%)	13648	(15.6%)	1916	(5.5%)
Turks	10602	(4.2%)	1378	(1.6%)	371	(1.1%)
Roma	7602	(3.0%)	450	(0.5%)	48	(0.1%)
Vlachs	429	(0.2%)	227	(0.3%)	329	(1.0%)
Serbs	2887	(1.1%)	1154	(1.3%)	666	(1.9%)
Other	5940	(2.3%)	1339	(1.5%)	408	(1.2%)
Unknown ethnic background	89	(0.03%)	41	(0.05%)	17	(0.05%)
TOTAL	255150	(100%)	87420	(100%)	34850	(100%)

Source: CEPS, Ljubana, in: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Review of national policies for education – FYROM, 05-Sept-2001, p.10

The data showed that Macedonians participated a lot more in secondary and higher education, in contrast to Albanians and other communities.

### 3.2 The case of university of Tetova

Having in mind the real need for education in Albanian, on 4 th June 1994 the Albanian Intellectuals Assembly in Macedonia was held and the decision to establish a university with Albanian language of instruction in Macedonia

was brought. Its headquarters would be situated in Tetovo. Informal bodies had also been created including the Intellectuals Assembly and the Headship for the Establishment of the University of Tetova.

The University of Tetova operated as an institution formed by the civic initiative but it was not accredited, it was not recognized and what is more, it was obstructed by state institutions. Police raided the premises of the university just days after it opened. Despite government warnings, the university re-opened two months later. This led to another police intervention: parts of the building were destroyed, equipment was confiscated and several administrators were arrested. One Albanian died in these clashes between Albanians and the Macedonian police. But the Albanian community did not abandon its support for the illegal university and, once again, the university re-opened.

The developments related to the officialization of the University of Tetova were associated with various different events in which both the intellectual and political factors were included.

The authorities considered this university to be illegal for two reasons: the instruction was held in Albanian and it was private - neither one was allowed under the law on higher education at that time (Marek, 2002). The Macedonian side was not prepared for the establishment of an Albanian University citing the following arguments: Macedonia fulfils all international standards in the field of minority education and is thus way ahead compared to many countries in the region; the establishment of a university with instruction fully in Albanian would lead to the creation of parallel worlds (Hristova, 2005).

Keeping in mind these developments on higher education it should be noted, that the demands of the Albanian community with respect to educational policy continually escalated. These developments can also be ascribed to the behavior of the Macedonian elite, whose reactions to Albanian demands were too slow and insufficiently comprehensive.

### *3.3 The engagement of the international factor in the officialization of the Albanian higher education: the establishment of the southeast European university (SEEU)*

The interest of the international factor in resolving the higher education issue for Albanians in Macedonia increased by the end of the 1990s and resulted in the establishment of the Southeast European University (SEEU) as a private university. The OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Max van der Stoep, played a central role in mediating the dispute over Albanian-language education. He supported continuously constitutional amendments, which should have made the access of Albanians for higher education easier (Walter, 2001).

At first, the solution of the issue of the usage of the mother tongue in higher education was imposed. For the first time the Law on Higher Education underwent changes (in 2000) which enabled private universities to offer Albanian as a language of instruction. A new law on higher education, which permitted the foundation of private and non-Macedonian speaking universities, made possible the establishment of the trilingual (Albanian, Macedonian and English) SEE University in Tetovo.

However, an inter-Albanian conflict emerged at that point, because a private university was being created prior to the resolution of the former's issue, which was established by a civic initiative. The establishment of the SEEU helped the students from UT because they were able to transfer and pursue their studies at SEEU.

### *3.4 The officialization of the university of Tetova (UT)*

The second period in the development of activities related to the officialization of the higher education in Albanian was the officialization of the ten-year operation of the UT. This followed the Ohrid Agreement which was incorporated in the Constitution of Macedonia as a political agreement between Albanians and Macedonians and which was a result of the armed conflict in 2001. The core change has to do with higher education, the main "bone of contention" (Vetterlein, 2006).

Article 6.2 of this agreement says that the state will financially support the higher education in the language that is spoken by at least 20% of the population in Macedonia.

Table 2. Students enrolled in undergraduate studies, citizens of the Republic of Macedonia, by ethnic affiliation, 2008/2009

Citizens of the Republic of Macedonia by ethnic affiliation										
	Total	Macedonians	Albanians	Turks	Roma	Vlachs	Serbs	Bosnians	other	unknown
Public higher schools	62 157	45 988	10 052	1 016	233	491	770	301	349	2 957
Public universities	49 585	39 317	4 939	708	195	445	712	246	280	2 743
(State University in Tetovo)	3479	370	2734	40	12	-	2	3	12	306
Private universities	10 502	4 896	4 987	287	34	29	41	41	62	125
(SEEU – Tetovo)	845	258	538	35	5	-	-	5	2	2

Source: Statistical review / State Statistical Office of the Republic of Macedonia. Population and social statistics, ISSN 1409-8997, 2.4.10.01 (644) Skopje, April 2010, pp.96-101

Therefore, to make the state financing of non-Macedonian speaking universities possible, the law on higher education was, once again. On 22nd February 2004, the Macedonian Government decided to recognize this university and then the Law on establishing the State University of Tetova (No 08/2004) was adopted by the Macedonian Parliament. It is a law that has created a normative basis for equal access to higher education opportunities for all communities.

The data from the Ministry of Education and Science in Macedonia show an increase in Albanian students' participation in higher education. This increase is a direct result of the establishment of the above-mentioned universities.

#### 4. How is the need to study in one's mother tongue perceived by students?

In order to see how important is education in one's mother tongue, we carried out a questionnaire (October 2010) with students from both universities (SUT and SEEU) and 634 students were included.

Table 3. The students' opinion about mother tongue education

Question	Answer	
	Yes	No
Is education in your mother tongue important?	602 (95%)	32 (5%)
Do you think there will be more opportunities for you and higher educational level if you study in your mother tongue?	558 (88%)	76 (12%)
Do you think studying in your mother tongue will help you achieve better results during your studies?	554 (88%)	80 (12%)

The students' answers give us the right to conclude that they prefer studying in their own mother tongue, because it will help them achieve better results. Though small, the number of those who think that studying in a language other than their mother tongue would not represent a problem, cannot be underestimated. This has mainly to do with the opportunities for studying in one of the international languages, which would enable them a better perspective in the future.

## 5. Conclusions

The right to education in the mother tongue in Macedonia has undergone several phases of its historical development and depended largely on daily politics and reflected the will of the political subjects.

The state's readiness to offer primary and secondary school in the mother tongue did not miss, but the situation was quite different when higher education was in question. In general, the state did not show good will in giving all its citizens equal opportunities to study in their mother tongue, even though international standards and conventions guarantee such a thing.

Citizens' efforts through various different extra-institutional initiatives as well as the support by the international community resulted in the establishment of higher education institutions. This implies a historical achievement even for the state itself in terms of raising the population's educational level and hence its development and prosperity.

We can justly conclude that Macedonia has managed to create a legal framework for the development of the democratic education which is founded upon the observance of human rights and freedoms to get educated in the mother tongue in accordance with international standards and conventions.

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